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CAN JEW AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP TOGETHER?

By

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Because it has been said
"Ever'thing comes t' him who waits
Except a loaned book."

Can Jew and Christian Worship Together?

I rejoice in the cause or in the circumstances which have seemed to make it wise and even needful to consider the question: Shall Jews and Christians worship together? Had the query been addressed to us by someone unfriendly to Israel, by someone chiefly bent upon facilitating the conversion of Jews, it would indeed have been negligible. But, in truth, the query has come from the heart of a friend—not only a personal friend, but a friend of Israel—a friend of Israel because he is a noble friend of humankind. For the soul of John Haynes Holmes is aflame with passion for justice to the least of peoples, as it in truth must be for reparation and redress to one of earth's great and ancient peoples, such as is our own.

John Holmes would no more think of attempting to convert or to proselytize Jews to any one of a hundred Christian sects than I would dream of moving his people to become disciples of Mohammed or the Buddha. The question: Can Jew and Christian worship together? is addressed to Jews and Christians alike by a friend of man, by an enfranchised soul which has

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liberated itself above and away from all that is narrowing and sectarian and divisive in Christendom, which has a true and deep reverence for the things we cherish. If I dissent in all earnestness and with all vigor from the proposal of Mr. Holmes, it is because, in the simplicity and integrity of his own viewpoint in relation to all problems, he has left out of account certain elements which require the most careful and searching consideration.

Even though I cannot deal with the length and breadth of Mr. Holmes's remarkable statement, it is necessary, and perhaps the more justified, because of our long-time and changeless friendship, to call attention to certain things wherein he is seriously in the wrong. Thus he declares: "Not anti-Semitism but anti-Judaism is the real problem which we have to solve." The fact is that Christendom is alike anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish. Religiously it is anti-Jewish; racially it is anti-Semitic, taking exception to the racial grouping of Jews, as if these did not constitute a group within the white race, taking exception to the Jews as religious disciples, as if these were terribly inferior to Christians as religionists. Mr. Holmes is right in implying that anti-Semitism is unreal in its bases, but it is terribly real in the results of its attitude of ill-will and hostility toward the Jew.

Again Mr. Holmes clearly declares: "If the Jews in many places of the world had political and military power to-day they would slay the Christians exactly

as the Christians have been slaying them." There is a Jewish factor in this problem after all, and Mr. Holmes, quite unlike himself for once, goes back to the Old Testament, which he finds full of stories of massacre and torment; goes back rather far to the entrance of the children of Israel into Canaan and the command of Jehovah to put its inhabitants to the sword. We Jews hold that in the three thousand and more years that have passed since Jews entered Canaan there has been a very considerable advance in the life and thought of the Jews, and as a Jew I am humanly certain that if Jews had political and military power to-day they would not slay the Christians as the Christians have been slaying them. Despite the catholicity and understanding of Mr. Holmes's spirit, he evidently has not been able to plumb the depths of Jewish forbearance and Jewish long-suffering, the inexhaustible and infinite capacity of the Jew for forgiving, loving and even serving those who wrong him.

Again, whatever be the validity of Mr. Holmes's utterance concerning the mythical character of Jewish and Christian orthodoxy and the universality of religion as a matter of natural experience rather than of special revelation, the humanity of Jesus as an historical figure belonging both to Judaism and to Christianity, I cannot find any warrant for his statement that "to the Jew the man of Nazareth is a heretic and apostate; he is worse than this. He is a fraud of the most obvious description." This does not truly

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or fairly convey the spirit of the Jew, whether orthodox or liberal. The liberal Jew thinks of Jesus as Mr. Holmes thinks of him, as a radiant teacher of the prophetic truths of Israel. The orthodox Jew may, it is true, judge Jesus by his fruits, in the attitude of Christendom toward the Jew, in which case the Jew can hardly be expected to form the highest estimate of Jesus. But Mr. Holmes is unjust to the Jew, whether orthodox or liberal, in assuming that the Jewish attitude toward Jesus is one of antagonism or enmity.

For Jesus has been crucified in the sight of the Jew for nearly two millennia by them who have called themselves by his name, but denied him in truth and in deed in all their relations with the Jewish brothers of Jesus from generation to generation. Insofar as Mr. Holmes imagines that the attitude of the Jew toward Jesus is one of cynicism and contempt and scorn, I must make the answer that if this were true it would constitute the very gravest condemnation of Christianity. For eighteen hundred years, certainly for most of that time, Jews have not been given an opportunity to know what Christianity is; least of all, to understand who Jesus was and what the Christ means. The very ignorance of the Jew, the very misunderstanding of the Jew, touching Jesus, as far as these still obtain with respect to the origin of Christianity and the place of Jesus in the panorama of Jewish unfoldment, these things condemn not the Jew but Christendom.

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The Jews of the Eastern world, who have never touched, as you and I touch, liberal Christians, real Christians, genuine followers of him they name the Christ—that is to say, two-thirds of the Jews of the world—do not know, yea cannot know, what Christianity is, what it means, or ought to mean, because they have been denied the opportunity of understanding, and much, if not all, that Christendom is and does, hides and obscures the lineaments of that Jewish countenance which is no more hidden from many Jews than it has been hidden from most Christians.

If the proposal of Mr. Holmes be that from time to time Jews unite in worship with Christians, I am the first to assent eagerly and heartily to such proposal. In truth, the speaker proposed twelve or thirteen years ago to his dear friends, John Haynes Holmes of the Unitarian Church and Frank Oliver Hall of the Universalist Church, that we together arrange a series of Union Services, which services, despite grave and even violent opposition, were held. The purpose of these Union Services was not alone to show that Jew and non-Jew could meet from time to time in the spirit of common worship of the universal Father. It was designed to do more than that—to bring about on the part of the three congregations represented in the Union Service united or common action on behalf of those social ideals to which every one of us was separately committed, and for the furtherance of which we together set out to win the enthusiasm of our

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several congregations. In other words, we did not worship together solely or even chiefly for the sake of common worship, but rather that in the spirit of such common worship as unites we might be fused together in the prosecution of a common purpose. That purpose was service to and furtherance of those high causes which all of us alike felt, and feel, were the central and essential things in our common religious aspirations.

When we arranged for our common service, each of us was mindful of the necessities of the case, each of us was meticulously scrupulous to avoid giving offense to the congregations of the others. We were of one mind and of one spirit in being utterly vigilant that no word be uttered, no prayer be offered up, no hymn be chanted, which did not include within itself the spirit of the three congregations worshipping together. I must confess that I have been in attendance at and participant in other Union Services when, as it seemed to me, ministers, believed to be and believing themselves to be liberal, have failed to choose out of their rich hymnody such chants as it would be possible for Jews to sing without confusion or embarrassment, have used stereotyped formulae with respect to the triune God in invoking the benediction or in offering petition in the presence of congregations made up largely or partly of Jews.

But the more important circumstance to be borne in mind with reference to the Union Services of more

than a decade ago is that when we worshipped together none of us did or would abate one jot or tittle of our respective positions, of our several loyalties. Into our common worship, held for a number of weeks, chiefly, as I have already put it, in the interest of the common support of our social ideals, there entered only those elements to which all of us together might without reluctance assent. We knew, as we worshipped together, that we would leave the place of our common worship and return to our various church bodies, each of us not less but more deeply and ardently loyal to his own heritage, because for an hour we had found it possible to link our hands in common worship. Each of us had gathered the resolution to move his people to make earnestly rather than laggardly, passionately rather than inertly, for those great social ends of life which, after all, are the final and supreme test of the verity of religious profession and the sincerity of religious practice.

If Jews and Christians are to worship together from time to time, we who are Jews can enter into the spirit of Christian worship and Christians for a time can enter into the spirit of Jewish worship. But let me make it very clear that I hold it would be an incalculable loss to the spiritual life of man if we Jews were to abandon, assuming such abandonment to be possible, our own particular type and form of worship. For that worship rests upon and has grown out of two thousand years and more of tradition, and

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it is compact of historical associations, of ancient traditions, of precious memories. It would be a most lamentable impoverishment of our common spiritual life if either the simplicity of the liberal Christian service, such as that which obtains in the Community Church, were to be given up or the beauties and splendors of the traditional Jewish liturgy were to be abandoned.

Thus Christians worshipping with Jews might find the Shema, the affirmation of the divine unity, quaint and interesting, and might even hold the Hebrew Kaddish or memorial prayer to be beautiful and moving, but to the Jew, the Shema and the Kaddish are infinitely more. When I speak the words of the Shema I do far more than recite the Jewish creed. There comes before me, as in a vision, the spectacle of Israel suffering, of Israel triumphant. The storied martyrdom of Israel rises before me as in a dream, my people's soul lives in me again, and I live again the memories of my people as I utter those deathless words of the Jew's spiritual and eternal affirmation—God is one and His name is one. For I behold a mighty procession of priests and prophets and seers and apostles and martyrs marching on and on, pilgrims of the invisible, sustained by that unfaltering trust which moved the Jew throughout the ages to live by and for the truth of the Divine unity. When you and I recite that prayer of our liturgy which we call the Kaddish, through the memories of our inner vision, we recreate

the most holy and tender things in our lives—recreate, as it were, all the touching and precious and beauteous memories of childhood and youth—our hopes, our fears, our tears, our dreams, all crowding into our souls as we pray again in these immemorial accents.

I can join in the Pater Noster or the Lord's Prayer, but the recital thereof stirs no memories in me. As I hear it or recite it, I frankly confess that I seek to reconstruct it, as it may be reconstructed, into that Hebrew tongue whence the form and spirit of it were in part derived by him who first uttered it. As I join in the Lord's Prayer, I think always and inevitably of its Hebrew original, and I think back to the time when Jesus first learned that prayer, as he must needs have learned it from his Jewish mother, for in the century associated with Jesus brief prayers containing the spiritual yearnings of the people had, under certain circumstances, been prescribed for Jews. But in truth it is almost impossible for me to put into the Lord's Prayer, however rich I find it, all that it means to the devout Christian to whom it bears memories and traditions as does the Shema to me. Yet may it be that more devoutly than some non-Jews I can pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us," for Christendom has for a millennium and more schooled the Jew in the discipline and art of long-suffering forgiveness.

But let us face the facts honestly and unequivocally. The Kaddish means much to me; the Shema means

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everything to me. The Pater Noster means something to me, and I can no more make the Pater Noster central to my own spirit of worship than Mr. Holmes or Dr. Hall could feel during the recital of the Shema all that I feel. My soul lives in its utterance. It is the medium through which I can wing myself upward. The Jew speaks to God and with God as he utters the words of the Shema, even though it be affirmation rather than petition. There is a place and a need for all these treasures of the spirit, Jewish or Christian, which should be conserved and utilized and magnified, each in its own fitting place.

Mr. Holmes declares: "For my part I would ask for nothing better than that Jews should remain Jews and Christians Christians, with the single exception that I would gladly have these two great branches of the human family come together in a closer affiliation of the spirit than they now enjoy." What Jew, worthy of the name, does not share this hope? But as a Jew I cannot avoid being vigilant lest we make not for a closer affiliation of the spirit, but for confusion in and destruction of the Jewish spirit. Mr. Holmes almost fails to understand that the worship of the Jew is only a part of the life of the Jew, and that we who are Jews are or have more than a religion in common. If there were nothing more than a Jewish religion, it would be perfectly admissible to urge that Jews and Christians worship together and abide together in the spirit of common worship.

But let us not fail to face the fact that there is very much more than that thing which is known as the Jewish religion. Judaism is the religion of Jews, and still Judaism is only one of the modes in which Jewish life, or what might be called Jewishness, expresses itself. I wish the Jew were all of his religion. I know that the Jew is more than his religion. His religion is only a part of him. Moreover, it is not the religion of the Jew that is offending in the sight of the non-Jewish world. It is the Jew as a member of a particular group, as a member of a racial family, who gives offense, rightly or wrongly, justly or unjustly, to the world without.

I am not willing to have my fellow Jews imagine, any more than I would have Christians imagine, that nothing stands in the way of a closer spiritual affiliation of Jew and Christian than their failure to worship together. The failure of Jew and Christian to worship together is in very truth the least of the causes that divide them. I am prepared to say that it is not in any appreciable sense or measure even one of the causes that divide the Jew from the Christian. I would not have the Jew lapse into the facile belief that he can make his peace with the rest of the world provided he be prepared to surrender the individuality, the particularity, if you please, of the synagogue.

I am fearful, I confess, for those Jews who have been given almost sufficing reason to find their Jewishness an unsupportable burden. Given this oppor-

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tunity of escape from the burden of Jewish obligation, and Jews not a few will forget that Jewishness implies very much more than a particular form of worship within a special type of church, and these will take themselves out of and away from the synagogue and easily go over to the ranks of Christendom on the ground that the reason for separate worship has passed. The Jew possessed of a God-consciousness, the religious Jew, the highest and noblest type of Jew, the Jew who feels within himself the call to be an apostle of a supremely simple, reasonable, ethical faith, he would not wholly abandon his own worship that he may occasionally or in part worship with non-Jews. The Jew who will avidly seize upon the opportunity of common worship is the minimum Jew, the suicidal Jew, the self-obliterating Jew, who is ready to burrow his way into any alien faith in order that he may have release and surcease from all the disadvantages and handicaps and burdens the bearing of which is become the token of the Jew in a Christian world. If such a thing could be as regular and continuous common worship of Jew and Christian, thousands of weak-kneed and faint-hearted and mean-spirited Jews would hail in common worship not a larger opportunity nor a finer obligation, but a long-wished-for method of escape from those ills of life and that life of evil which a friendless world has forced upon them.

Has Mr. Holmes adequately understood that Christian worship is only one of a thousand modes in which

Christianity expresses itself, whereas Jewish worship is the chief of the differentiae wherein the inward and outward elements of Jewish life meet and blend. Even though Jews and Christians meet in worship, be it remembered that Christians breathe Christianity in the circumambient air. Everything in a non-Jewish world makes against the retention of Jewish loyalty. In the Western world as it is, everything makes for Christian integration and everything makes for Jewish disintegration.

But the heart of the whole matter lies, as I see it, in Mr. Holmes making for one thing and thinking and speaking of another. What he would have, and what I at his side would have, is that Jew and Christian shall work together, toil together, serve together. But they are mistaken, utterly in error, who imagine that it is our failure to worship together which makes impossible our working together. From the minds of Jews and Christians who alike hear me, I would remove the erroneous notion that if only we can worship together then we will be one, and the old animosities and antagonisms shall have been ended.

My fundamental objection to the plea for the common worship of Jew and Christian, save as these should and do meet together from time to time in a common service, is that the proposal involves a wrongly placed emphasis. I for my part would do what in me lies in order to prevent Jew and Christian alike imagining that it is the difference of worship that divides them or

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that keeps them apart, and that worshipping together would or will solve all their problems.

Infinitely more is necessary, rather than less, despite Mr. Holmes's finely spoken message. Jews and Christians are not kept apart by the fact that we are Jews nor that Christians are Christians, not by the circumstance that we worship as Jews nor yet by the fact that Christians worship as Christians. Nothing in Jewish faith or life stands in the way of perfect and fraternal accord on the part of the Jew with the Christian. The doctrine of the chosen people is not so firmly or widely held by Jews to-day as to stand between Jews and Christians. What stands in the way of a higher unity of Jew and Christian is something that Mr. Holmes does not sense, because it is so foreign to his own soul—namely, the whole of the attitude of Christendom toward the Jew. Worshipping with the Jew from time to time may help to correct this, but more is needed on the part of the Christian—a new understanding of the faith of the Jew, a new attitude toward the life of the Jew or toward the living Jew.

Two things keep Jew and Christian apart—the un-Jewishness of the Jew and the Christlessness of Christendom. It is the un-Jewish Jew who excites abhorrence. It is the Jew without a God-consciousness, the Jew who lightly casts away the ennobling and exalting memories of his past, the Jew ready to sell for a mess of potage the high and holy things in the faith

and life of Israel! The Godless Jew, the Jew stripping himself, as it were, of the Jewish God-consciousness and turning his back upon the moral genius of his people, the Jewish man who is cheap or mean or rowdyish; the Jewish woman who is vulgar—these stand between Jew and Christian and not our worshipping together as Jews.

But if Jews and Christians are in some measure kept apart by the un-Jewishness of the Jew, let it be stated without fear and with utter courage that what most of all stands between Jew and Christian is the Christlessness of Christendom. What is needed is not that Jew and Christian shall worship together for an hour, but that Jews become re-Judaized and Christians at last be Christianized. I would, if I could, win Jews to Jewishness. I would, if I could, proselytize Christians in the direction of Christianity. The most urgent and imperative need of the world to-day is the Christianization of Christendom.

Once again I protest, as I did touching the Oberammergau spectacle, against selling priceless things too cheaply—religion for some tears, or for a sigh of sympathy with suffering. In the same way I protest against the proposed solution of one of the profoundest of human problems—the rightful ordering of the relation between Jew and Christian—by the gesture of common worship. The problem is complex and grave and terrible, and the proffered solution is too simple and facile and cheap. The need for the Christian is

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not of union with the Jew for an hour of worship, but of unity of spirit with the Jew at all times. This is not even a halfway measure. It is less than that, for it involves little or nothing on the part of the Christian, but a great surrender on the part of the Jew.

What is the fault of the Jew? Is it his separateness, his distinctiveness, and is he to surrender and end that through common worship and thus disappear? The proposal is too simple. It conveys a wrong impression; unintentionally it misleads. The Jew may or will be led to suspect that what stands in the way of perfect fraternization of Jew with Christian is the individual or separate worship of the Jew, and this is far from the truth, even as Christians may be led to believe that what stands between them and the Jew is their separate worship and naught else. Once again I remind you that as I looked upon the Oberammergau drama last summer it seemed to me that it would have been of infinite importance for someone to have arisen and to have cried out to the multitude of Christians assembled that to weep over the crucified lamb is not to be a Christian. "If you would be Christians, you must be as he was; you must love, you must serve, you must forgive. Would you be Christians? Then put away the evil of your Christlessness from before his eyes. Cease to do evil to his fellow Jews. Learn to deal justly with the Jew."

No one can be more bent than I am upon achieving perfect understanding and fellowship between Jew and

Christian. But if in order to have the understanding of Christendom I must cease to be a Jew, or I must do that which will make for the minimizing of my Jewishness, then I must do without such understanding—as my fathers have had to do without it for hundreds of years, yea for more than a millennium. I crave the understanding and the reverence of the Christian world, but for myself as a Jew and not for me as a chameleon. I covet understanding of the Jew, not seeking to utter in accents which are not his own the Pater Noster, but affirming simply and earnestly and everlastingly as did the holy mothers and glorious fathers in Israel—Hear, oh Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is one. My unfaltering soul shall not demean itself by purporting to be other than it is in order that it may achieve some quasi-understanding of what it is not.

Mr. Holmes, of all men in the Christian ministry, by virtue of his undaunted courage and his unstooping firmness, is appointed to make clear that what in truth stands and will forever stand between Jew and Christian until it be ended is the Christlessness of those who call themselves Christian. Again, I repeat, the Christianization of Christendom is the supreme need of the Western world and not an hour of common worship, however beauteous and appealing it may be made. More important than that some Jews and some Christians worship together it is that my fellow Jews shall make for a maximum of moral and spiritual

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worth or worship in their own lives, and what Christians need is to return to those deathless affirmations through life of love and sacrifice that vast numbers of so-called Christians in the world to-day seem to have expunged from the creed and life of Christendom.

We as Jews still have a place and a duty, a service and an obligation in the world. We whom our enemies could not affright must not succumb to the plea of those who are our genuine friends to put away the integrity of our own common religious life. Yes, we would worship with Christians the God of men, but we ask, we demand, we press for something infinitely more important—that we work and dream, aspire and achieve, toil and serve together, not for an hour, but every day until that day shall have come when one prayer will be in the heart of Jew and Christian alike: “Our Father, which art in heaven, Thy will has been done. Thou art holy: we would be holy. Thou art our Father. We, Thy children, would become brothers in one divine human family.” This has been the dream of the Jew; let this become the resolution of Christendom as it has never ceased to be the aspiration of the Jew.

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